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## *Book Review*

## Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal

Steven Ross

*The Graduate Center and Hunter College/CUNY*

*Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*

Heather Widdows, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, 262 pages + 48 pages of notes, \$24.95

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Correspondence: [sonokal@earthlink.net](mailto:sonokal@earthlink.net)



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In many ways, this is an impressive and intriguing book. Heather Widdows offers a provocative and original analysis of the role of beauty, the pervasive promulgation of what she calls “the beauty ideal,” in modern life. It is also a somewhat frustrating one. I will get to the content of that analysis, and the reasons for my frustration, soon enough. But first, a few words about what one might call some of the meta-issues in the background when taking up any account of a subject like this.

In some ways we are in a kind of golden age in philosophy. We are, with a book like *Perfect Me*, very far from speculations about Grician intentionality, or what Mary Didn't Know. And it is a mark of genuine progress, I think, that this should be so. After all, we are inundated with representations of beauty, through advertisements, television, and film – even through sport and the music industry. Many, I am reliably told, exchange images of themselves (and strangers) endlessly and obsessively through something called “social media,” and such images, tweaked and posed for with great self-consciousness, are objects of genuine pride and shame. Given all this, why *shouldn't* a philosopher, armed with the categories of political and cultural analysis made possible through Marxist and feminist and critical race theory, turn her alert and discerning eyes to the subject of beauty? Deflationism, the explanatory gap and the trolley car problem will doubtless always be with us. Surely it is a good thing when philosophy expands, breaks out of familiar domains and tries to make sense of this bewildering *world* we live in, not simply engage one more time with an all too familiar *philosophical* problem.

Yet, when we leave this well-known world with its well-known rules for success and failure, it is now not so clear what it means to be *right*. Widdows locates her work in the midst of a vast literature. The footnotes are predictably voluminous. But in the end – as is only right – this is a personal reading of an aspect of our everyday culture. And because this is a culture, and an aspect, most of us are already quite familiar with, where Widdows fails to persuade, this is so because the reader is simply likely to have equally well-founded personal views to the contrary.

All right; these are the considerations that are in the background as we enter into this brave new world, where philosophers take up our contemporary culture and try to say something insightful about it. We are in the world of criticism as much as philosophy, and the idea of expertise here is now more elusive. What we want to see is an expansive sensibility, a receptivity to what makes a subject complicated, and a willingness to acknowledge where certain claims are more or less personal. Widdows offers an interesting reading of the beauty ideal as it plays out in our present day world; of that there can be no doubt. But she is not always alert to where she is offering a personal or idiosyncratic claim as if it were some undeniable, just discovered fact.

So what is this reading? Widdows argues for the following:

The dominant beauty ideal is increasingly uniform . Of course, variations remain across cultures and groups picked out by race, ethnicity and class. We would not expect the “beauty ideal” of the black working class in Fortaleza to be identical with that of the privileged white community in Beverley Hills. But that acknowledged, the *trend* is to increasing uniformity; as time goes on, we see such local variation diminish and the hegemony of a more and more homogenous conception. (20, 21)

And what is this conception? No surprises here: thinness, curves with thinness, fitness, and youth. This conception, while of course directed mostly at women, and felt most significantly, on the whole, by women, is also increasingly gender neutral. Men also feel it, feel the pressure, the need to be thin, to look young, to look fit and so forth. It is an interesting feature of *Perfect Me* that Widdows resists seeing the beauty ideal as a means by which one gender oppresses the other. Both feel the demands of this conception, not equally perhaps, but there is enough oppression to go round, and enough that is felt by all, that Widdows rejects seeing the domination of the current beauty ideal as a proxy for gender suppression. In any event, while the oppression is not perfectly symmetrical across genders to be sure, the trend here, again, is towards greater and greater symmetry over time. (23-26; 62; 71-86)

But many readers will say, I am sure (since I was such a reader and I cannot be that unusual) “is this really so?” What does it mean, exactly, to say the beauty ideal is becoming “more uniform”? To begin with, what exactly is the relevant time frame to which this claim is said to apply? If we look at films and advertisements from the 1950s and early 1960s and compare them with those of today, it is pretty undeniable that we now see far greater racial diversity, and far greater variety in physical type. Now, it is the rare store that does not showcase what their clothing looks like on men and women with bodies very different from what Widdows describes. This is no accident; it is a non-trivial part of contemporary feminism to affirm, forcefully, what is now called the “body positive” perspective, which counters the idea that there is a single normal way to look, that women in particular must have a single particular shape to be thought beautiful. Given her thesis, I suppose it should be no surprise that Widdows’ discussion of the body positive movement is extremely brief – it merits but two sentences, where she characterizes it as a movement to “find better beauty norms” rather than as a resistance to uniformity (220). But returning to the main point at hand: I just do not find plausible this claim of greater uniformity that Widdows makes so confidently. Everything I see in stores, in advertisement, in the present day celebrity culture, tells me that the beauty ideal is far more diverse, far less uniform now than ever. It is undeniably more diverse racially. And

with racial diversity has come a greater diversity in the types of faces and bodies that get put forward as beautiful as well. How can anyone, looking at old *Life* magazines on one hand, and what surrounds us today on the other, come to any other conclusion? And we have not, with these observations, even mentioned the way in which vivid tattoos and piercings are a no big deal feature of self-presentation for an ever increasing part of the population. When I was growing up in the so-called wild sixties, tattoos were found on sailors and carnival workers, sometimes, and never, I think it fair to say, on women.

So as a threshold matter, I must confess, I find Widdows' observation here a bit questionable. Of course, the *reach* of the dominant ideal was arguably less sixty, seventy years ago. Women (and men) in third world countries might very well never have *seen* Bridget Bardot on the cover of *Life* magazine to begin with. The *world* was more diverse then, sure. But to the extent we are talking about the rise of the Beauty Ideal commensurate with the rise and increased reach of global film, fashion, and advertising, we are talking about an Ideal that has become more inclusive, more diverse, since its initial post World War II incarnation.

But let us move on. Most provocatively, beauty, or the imperative that we do our best to *be* beautiful, is now, or is increasingly, a *moral* ideal. And here, we come to the heart of the argument. There are many claims in *Perfect Me* that are interesting and thought provoking, but I think it is fair to say that this is the central idea, the central engine, that drives all else – so much so that the claim even figures in the book's subtitle. "Beauty," she says, is now, in short, a moral ideal. Consider the following:

*The claim that beauty is an ethical ideal is a straightforward claim that the beauty ideal is emerging as, and for some already is, effectively a moral ideal, a value framework.... Many people judge themselves according to their success and failure in beauty terms...*

*That beauty is the primary moral framework for some and an increasingly dominant moral imperative for others I argue is already the case. I do not endorse beauty as an ethical ideal, indeed much of the argument [here] focuses on the harms of such an ideal, rather I argue that we should recognize what is happening and part of this is an ethical turn. For very many of us, when we say we are "good" at engaging in beauty work we do mean we are morally good; that these actions are good in themselves. The implication is that we have not merely done something good instrumentally...but something good in general, something we value for, and believe is good, in itself, a moral good.*

*That beauty is functioning as an ethical ideal – providing values and standards against which we judge ourselves ethically good and bad – is particularly clear when we consider*

*what it is to “fail.” Beauty failure results in explicit moral judgments of culpability and responsibility and as such, beauty failures for some are effectively equivalent to moral vices. (27 – 30)*

The tone is confident, revelatory, hectoring, and mildly alarmist. We are in that special place where the wild and the unexpected is casually yoked up with what is said to be undeniable and there for all to see (Hume is a master at this). The central claim is certainly intriguing. But what are we to say before so many remarkable assertions? Well, first, notice the many hedges, the many “for some” sprinkled throughout. Is this claim then sufficiently proved if five percent of the population does in fact think of beauty this way? Two percent? What sort of social generalization is in play here exactly? Second, notice the fast and loose equivalence between “moral” and “intrinsic.” Moral values are often rightly characterized as intrinsic values, sure, but the moral is but a species of the genus here; not all intrinsic values are moral, at least not in some ontologies, and not without a great deal of further argument. It begs the question to argue that the beauty ideal is an intrinsic ideal for many, or for some, and then from that conclude it is a moral one. We need to show that any ideal regarded as intrinsic is ipso facto moral. But this claim, once spelled out, is very dubious. My hunch is it is true only if we stipulate that it is. There is nothing in the way these concepts are non-controversially deployed that requires this reading. What is the same point from the other direction, Widdows stipulatively sweeps the “aesthetic” aside as being a plausible candidate for a possible fit here; it just cannot quite capture the rich demanding nature of the beauty ideal (at least, we must imagine, not “for some”). But why is that? What is the argument that it cannot be so? Perhaps there are some aesthetic ideals that are felt in just this way, at least by some people at certain times. Looking at the life (and awful death) of Yukio Mishima would be a good case I point I think; perhaps Oscar Wilde would be another. Anyway, arguing from a characterization of the phenomenology, how it feels to worry about the norm, to a characterization of the norm that is its cause, very much begs the question. The argument seems to be that if a norm has a certain grip, and that grip resembles the grip of moral norms often have in its felt urgency, then, it must be a species of the moral too. But this just cannot be right. It is interesting how arguments that once held center stage now seem completely forgotten: Philippa Foot made a version of this point forcefully in “Is Morality A System of Hypothetical Imperatives?” over fifty years ago. If what made a command of morality “categorical” was its force not depending upon the interests or desires of the one to whom it was addressed, then etiquette may be thought of as morally “categorical” too. Her point was *not* to conclude that therefore etiquette *is* a species of the moral! She took it as obvious that it wasn’t. Rather, the point seems to be that this mark of the moral will not give us what is special about it, what the moral is. But Widdows seems to move in just the opposite direction, drawing the conclusion Foot cautioned us against.

If a feature of the moral is found elsewhere, then that “elsewhere” must be baptized as the moral too. No doubt some people care as much about appearances as others do about racial equality. What in heaven’s name follows from *that*?

Let us assume that Widdows is right in her claim that there is an affinity, in “what it is like,” to feel a moral demand and the demand of the beauty ideal, and let us leave to the side how pervasive this is, whether it is true for many, or merely for some. Still: this strand of commonality will not, and should not, give us category inclusion. Why not, taking a page from Foot here, argue the other way and say: it seems there are some distinctly aesthetic ideals that are felt in this unusually strong way? Why not say, it turns out that not only moral ideals can command a fierce sort of allegiance or sense of shame? Putting it this way, adjusting our account of what “the aesthetic” can be like, rather than including in “the moral” any norm, so long as it is sometimes felt a certain way, seems an equally good account of the data. I am inclined to say it is actually a better one, because there are so many other features of the moral that cannot be mapped on to the beauty ideal at all.

This point is worth pursuing. Because the claim that beauty is a kind of “moral ideal” is so central to the argument, it is worth exploring what is usually meant by “the moral” and asking how much of it survives when within the beauty ideal on any reasonable understanding of either. Widdows tends to argue in one direction – a feature of the beauty ideal is picked out and its affinities with the moral are noted. But there is no systematic or even casual account of “the moral” as such, and so how much moral is *left out*, does not arise, when within the beauty ideal, even if every claim of affinity is granted, never arises. Let us turn to this then and ask, what is characteristic of the moral, and how much of it might be said to be found intact in contemporary beauty practice?

The term “moral” is a what we used to call, in the old days, something of a “cluster concept.” By that I mean, there are several strands to the idea – like “art” in this way. And, also like art in this way, how many such “strands” must be in place in order for the use of the term to be warranted might indeed be a matter of judgment, at least on the margins. Whether you can or want to call this piece of driftwood a “work of art” may be a matter of choice, or where we are in cultural history; not so for the late Cezanne. So: we should have a good list of the central cases, the conceptual moves we are typically able to make when feeling our way around such cases, and then ask how much of such talk can be mapped on to the candidate case at hand – here, in this case, on to the world of contemporary beauty. If someone were to say we can see nature as a work of art, of course, we *could*; but it would be important in defending this claim to take up and defeat the way in which here, before nature, unlike in the central case of say painting, we cannot speak

of choices by an artist that can be criticized. Perhaps in the end this difference will not bother us. Fine. But it must be faced if the claim, if this “way of seeing” is to be defended. So, with that in mind, let us turn to some of things typically in place when we speak of “the moral,” or of a “moral demand.” When that is done, we can then ask how natural, or artificial, it may be to speak of the world of beauty as generating a *moral* ideal.

For example, to speak of a demand as a moral demand is to imply, for me at least, that it is a demand we can reasonably make of all; it requires no special ability. Not everyone can think quickly on *Jeopardy*, but presumably, all are capable to keeping their promises. Also, to think of a demand as moral is usually to think of it as non-optional, a point for us now forever associated with Kant. You may just decide not to go to law school, and no demand that you do follows your pursuit of a different life. But you cannot just decide not to honor your obligations and have that be the end of it. Far from it. And for me, borrowing from Mill and Kant here, to speak of a demand as moral is also, usually, to imply that it has something, non-trivial, to do with treating persons or other sentient creatures in accord with a certain standard; it has something to do with respecting others or worrying about their welfare in a non-trivial way. And so: it is a moral demand that we not inflict suffering upon people or animals. I would never call it a moral demand to keep one’s room neat. And I do not think it is even a moral demand to refrain from satirizing a person when doing stand up comedy; here the “injury” is seen as within the bounds of the acceptable, whereas it *is* a moral wrong to falsely claim a neighbor is a faithless spouse or a dishonest businessman. These differences are important to our ordinary understandings, to the “language games” we think in play when talking about or taking up morality. And when speaking of “Do x!” as a moral demand, normally, I would think it would be implied that if one were to fail to do x, then, some feelings of shame or guilt would be in order. And the phrase “in order” in that last sentence is *crucial*; it cannot be enough that people actually feel this way, it must be *justified* that they do. Simply to experience a demand as, well, demanding, to feel a similar phenomenology to what one feels before a *prima facie* moral demand, cannot be enough, as any therapist will tell you. Lots of things that feel like moral demands may be guilt induced habits inherited from controlling parents, or cravings caused by abrasive capitalism. We cannot, to return to a point with which we began, look to the affinity in the inner states as proof of similarity or near identity in the cause of such states. After all, a sense of giddy intoxication can be caused by drugs, wine, sex, or enlightenment. It hardly means the causes are all tokens of some larger type. And so it is here. Just because “some” (to use Widdows’ never far away qualifying term) feel beauty “as” a moral ideal is not yet enough to show it *is* one. Surely no one who fails to pluck their eyebrows or stay true to their wish to lose ten pounds feels the crushing guilt that someone who has lost his family’s college fund money in Las Vegas does. Or, if somehow they *do* feel similarly, this attests to the strangeness of their

inner states; it is no argument that these are *in fact* two tokens of the same normative type. Whatever “guilt” someone feels when failing with respect to “the beauty ideal” is, I suggest, metaphorical, not real guilt at all. Or conversely, it ought to be so termed. Real guilt, whatever the phenomenology of the inner state, is not warranted before the (or a) beauty ideal. It just isn’t. A friend who feels guilty she did not wash her hair or pluck her eyebrows or get her (or his) nails done or go to his exercise class just needs a good talking to or a drink, probably both. A friend who feels guilty because he failed to pay a loan back to a friend counting on that money to pay for his son’s summer camp needs help in figuring out how to pay that loan back.

Of course, we can always tell stories in which actions with what we might call beauty content have moral content too. So suppose someone realizes too late they failed to put on deodorant before heading to an important social gathering, and feels guilty about being sweaty and stinky. I do not resist the example in the least. But this is not helpful to Widdows, since she (rightly) insists her claim must be understood in a *non-instrumental* way. We cannot graft reasonable moral demands onto a story that, in this case, is tied to grooming as a way of making out the claim that beauty is an *autonomous* moral ideal. Here, in the example above, modest respect for others and their reasonable expectations generates a moral reason for action that has beauty behavior as its content. But anything can have moral content with the right background grafted on. T.M. Scanlon gives a justly famous example of the driver who can easily turn the wheel and avoid hitting a pedestrian, having then a reason for action regardless of how he feels. It is true; he does. Would we then say this example shows us that *driving* is an autonomous *moral* ideal?

The difference seems to me important. In the case of moral failure, the objective circumstances must be rectified; the external state of affairs that is one way rather than another through error must be made otherwise. This is just not the case with the beauty ideal. One could just not go to exercise class any more, and decide not to care. No mark of Cain follows one all the days of one’s life henceforth. By contrast, if when a wrongdoer feels guilt or shame about a theft or a wrong he must, if sincere, make that wrong right. And if he doesn’t or won’t – well, this is what courts are for. I take it is obvious where the analogy fails. There is no wrongfully injured party when one fails with respect to beauty. Unless of course one imports a moral story into the background, as described above. And that is why there is no beauty court to make right the wrong.

And this point connects to a deep tension, or ambivalence in the project throughout. As Widdows herself says, she is herself “not endorsing” the beauty ideal. It brings, as she says, plenty of harms – insecurity, for example, social anxiety, low self esteem and so forth. But on the other, she is loath to see women (and men to the extent it is relevant)

as victims, as manipulated cogs in a desire making machine. The pursuit of beauty, or worry about beauty, can also bring with it a certain sort of self expression, be a form of enjoyment or play, and the like. On one hand, our response to this ideal, taking more time over our appearance, doing more maintenance, even considering surgery, is all understandable and maybe not such a bad thing; on the other this is a suffocating demand that seems all too ubiquitous and out of control. It is hard, understandably, if you are writing a book on a certain norm, to think that perhaps this norm and what it asks of us in the end may not be so important after all. I can certainly imagine a comparable point, a comparable essay, on cell phone use among teenagers. On one hand would be the hand wringing, the news stories of unhappy teens nearly committing suicide when they are not liked on Facebook or their texts are not returned. On the other there would have to be a bit of incredulity that this, not subsistence wages, police racism, income inequality, species disappearance, the threat to reproductive liberties, the lack of real opportunity for the working class and so forth, is the object of so much emotional angst. A kind of “oh please, get over it!” just *has* to enter into your thoughts when immersing yourself in so much care, so much worry, so much concern, about so much that is in the end so far from what is central to human welfare and human flourishing. Widdows plays it straight, most of the time. It is a social fact she reports neutrally. This is how people feel, this is what people (or some people) do. But a certain normative judgment of the phenomena has to enter in too. When taking up the case of a fifteen-year old yearning for breast implants, even Widdows, herself never inclined to characterize these desires as “false consciousness,” cannot help but note how reasonable it is for others to see this desire and its strength for this young woman as unfortunate. (221-222) And this case, this story, prompts a further observation: Widdows throughout never takes up the way this Ideal and its felt power is very unevenly distributed across our stages of life. Surely how we feel as teenagers and young adults is one thing, how we feel much further along in life is another. We often laugh, later in life, at how important it was long ago to look good to our friends, or to seem desirable, and so forth. Surely it is a highly relevant fact, unlike what is so before the demands of friendship or intimate relationships, that this is a good, or Ideal, whose power to sway us peaks at a specific time of life and tends to have increasingly less pull on us later on as we age.

Consider again that teenager desperately wanting those breast implants. Let us assume she fails to get them, perhaps she cannot afford them or is just prevented from getting them by her parents. One way or another, let us assume thirty years go by and she is now forty-five. I submit that it is more than likely, thirty years later, she fails to feel this deprivation as all that much of a loss! And that I can make this prediction with such a high degree of confidence is a highly relevant fact about the subject at hand. We tend to be more vulnerable to the demands of the beauty ideal at certain times of life, when we

are younger and beginning to construct our sense of self, when we do not have much objective accomplishment, or children, or a dozen other things, to counter this particular way of achieving self esteem, and the insecurities that this road brings. Of course, this is but a generalization; I do not deny that for some, the need to appear attractive burns fiercely until the last stages of life. But still: surely it is a mistake to think of persons in an essentialist, a-historical way here. There is no one self with one set of desires, but a series of selves across time with different concerns, and it is not irrelevant that the typical story is one in which the pull of this ideal steadily diminishes as we age and have more in our lives than what we have when relatively young. Yet this fact, this platitude, is in no way taken up in *Perfect Me*.

Consider the following analogy: aggression in men is far greater when men are young, and this is a very relevant fact when asking “how aggressive are men, anyway?” I cannot imagine taking the question up without looking at the ages at which men tend to leave gangs, or repeat offenders tend to stop having brushes with the law, or young aggressive drivers start to show patience in traffic, and so forth. (Insurers have very good, probably near perfect, data on the last of these, needless to say. If you asked an insurer, “How aggressive are men drivers?”, the answer would be: “that depends entirely on what stage in life you are talking about.”) Of course, Whitey Bolger was a very scary guy until his last breath, but I think the point is pretty undeniable. There are lots of law abiding dads picking up their kids from soccer practice in the suburbs that did some really stupid aggressive things in their twenties. And analogously, to speak of the beauty ideal as felt as a moral ideal is to skip over a crucial threshold question – is this so for persons at all stages of life, or only during some, typically younger stages? Surely the stages of life matter, to some extent or other. But *how much* they matter, and whether they fall off as people age varies in interesting ways with wealth, or education levels, or ethnicity, or race, or none of these things – none of this is ever taken up. So, as I said at the start of this essay, this is a book both intriguing and frustrating. Widdows’ determination to see the beauty ideal as expressed in increasingly gender neutral terms, and her disinclination to see our vulnerability to this ideal in terms of false consciousness or victimhood, are both very welcome and, to my knowledge, unique to her treatment. But her failure to explore “the moral” apart from the phenomenology of feeling, and her failure to take up the ways in which here, where we are in life makes a significant difference, (so very unlike moral life in this way) are serious limitations in the account. The two points are not unconnected. It is precisely because there is so much more to the moral than the way it feels on the inside that it does not go away, or wax and wane for us depending on where we are in life. And it is because in the end, the beauty ideal does not traffic in matters of significance from the standpoint of welfare, or respect for others, that we can, in time, leave it aside or simply choose not to care.